Lithuanians Get Real Choices In Historic Vote

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R. (AP) — Lithuanians voted Saturday for a local Parliament in the Soviet Union's first sanctioned multiparty election, and an opposition group calling for secession claimed it was leading in its own early tallies.

Whoever wins, the new legislature is certain to try to lead this Baltic republic toward independence, because both the reformed Communists and opposition support the idea. The Communists have broken with Moscow and made some alliances with the opposition in a bid to stay in power.

"This day is a line between the past and the future," Vytautus Landsbergis, chairman of the grass-roots pro-independence Sajudis movement, declared before marking his paper ballot at a high school in Vilnius, Lithuania's capital.

At least six legal parties, plus the front-runner Sajudis popular movement, participated in the vote, which was to elect a 141-member Parliament.

In unofficial returns compiled by Sajudis early Sunday, candidates the group favored won 47 of 52 districts tallied.

The reformed Lithuanian Communist Party won 12 seats, including eight in which it was allied with Sajudis and four in which it competed with Sajudis.

"Happy? Yes, so far," said Landsbergis as he was congratulated by supporters at the group's headquarters shortly before midnight.

Among the reported Communist winners was party first secretary and Lithuanian president Algirdas Brazauskas. He led Lithuania in December when it became the first of the 15 Soviet republics to legalize non-Communist parties.

Unofficial groups in the other two Baltic republics, Latvia and Estonia, ran and endorsed candidates in local elections in December, but Saturday's was the first official multiparty election.

With all but one of the parties supporting independence, there was no doubt the coalition Lithuanian government likely to emerge from the voting would be charged with implementing a policy of secession from the Soviet Union.

Officials of the reform Communist Party were sanguine about the possibility of finishing second.

"The party is not afraid to be in the opposition. In fact, we will have a quieter and easier future," party ideologist Maris Gurmanas said. He said the party hoped for 30 percent to 40 percent of the seats.

Landsbergis predicted victory for Sajudis, although perhaps by a slim margin. "We will have a majority, not especially a big majority, perhaps 50-50," he said.

Sajudis and the Lithuanian Communist Party fielded candidates in nearly every district, but in about 30 districts the same candidate was supported by both.

The only party opposed to full independence was the hard-line Lithuanian chapter of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union — still loyal to Moscow — which draws support from Lithuania's 300,000-strong ethnic Russian minority. It vied in 78 districts.

"Our party is for a sovereign, free, socialist Lithuania within the Soviet Union," said Juozas Jarmalavicius, a leader of the hard-line Communists.

Voting was straightforward, with voters receiving ballots listing only the names and workplaces of the multiple candidates for their particular district, and then having to choose only one.

Ballots were marked behind curtained booths and then dropped into the ballot box.

Officials said they did not expect official results until Tuesday. Some 2.56 million of Lithuania's 3.8 million people were eligible to vote.